

Report on scholarly exchange visit to China, December 2012
Labor & Labor Movements Section of the American Sociological Association (ASA)

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Basics

On December 28-31, 2012, a 4-member group representing the ASA Labor and Labor Movements Section (LLM), accompanied by Katie Quan of the University of California Labor Center, met with Chinese labor academics and practitioners in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong (with funding support from the Ford Foundation China). The trip was aimed at getting mutually acquainted and establishing institutional relationships that would lay the basis for continuing intellectual exchange and communication. We presented research from the two countries, exchanged information about the state of labor and labor research in the US and China, and explored possible areas of collaboration.

In addition to Katie Quan, the LLM group included Jennifer Chun, University of Toronto (Chair of RC-44, the Research Committee on Labor Movements of the International Sociological Association); Steve McKay, University of California Santa Cruz (Chair-Elect of LLM); Ian Robinson, University of Michigan (3rd year LLM Council member); and Chris Tilly, UCLA (Past Chair of LLM).

Our agenda included:

- December 28-29, Beijing Meetings with representatives of the China Association of Work and Labor (CAWL) of the Chinese Sociological Association, at the Institute of Sociology within the Chinese Academy of Social Science. On the CAWL side participants included Chair Feng Tongqing, Vice Chair Shi Xiuyin, Vice Presidents Tong Xin and Xao Wei, Executive Board members Song Yue and Li Wenpei, and a number of associated graduate students. Presentations included:
 - From the Chinese side: Overview of Chinese sociology and the Chinese Sociological Association; Overview of the China Association of Work and Labor; Characteristics of Employment and labor organization in China; Developments in collective bargaining; Regional collective bargaining and collective agreements; Situation of Chinese labor NGOs; China's Labor Contract Law
 - From the US side: Overview of American labor sociology; Trade policy and the labor movement; Innovations in US labor organizing; The politics of immigration and the role of immigrant workers in the US
- December 30, Guangzhou: Meeting at Sun Yat-Sen University, convened by He Gaochao, co-director with Katie Quan of the Berkeley-Sun Yat-Sen International Center for Joint Labor Research (located at Sun Yat-Sen). Attendees included Chris King Chi Chan (City University of Hong Kong), a number of Sun Yat-Sen faculty and graduate students, Ellen David Friedman of the Center, and Eli Friedman (Cornell). Presentations included:
 - From the Chinese side: He Gaochao, Union elections in China
 - From the US side: Jennifer Chun, worker power in the neoliberal era; Erin Mahoney, Communications Workers of America, Collective bargaining in the US; Chris Tilly, Making retail jobs better.
- December 30 evening, Guangzhou: Dinner with Chen Weiguang, just-retired Chairman of the Guangzhou Federation of Trade Unions and a strong advocate of greater worker voice within the All-China Federation of Trade Unions.

- December 31 at Asia Monitor Research Center (AMRC), Hong Kong. Meeting with Hong Kong-based labor NGOs. Included: Apo Leong (AMRC, Hong Kong Social Security Society), Wing Sze Sally Choi (AMRC), Sze Wan Debby Chan and Yi yi Debby Cheng (SACOM = Students and Scholars Against Corporate Misconduct), Fuk Ying Patricia Tse (Worker Empowerment), Rui Na Na (Globalization Monitor), Melina Wong (ITUC Global Union Federation, Hong Kong office), So Sheung (Labor Education and Service Network), Tony K.L. Fung (Worker Rights Consortium). Katie Quan gave a presentation about the Hershey's case and the dilemmas of worker organizing among student interns in the U.S.
- January 1, Hong Kong. Chris Tilly and Ian Robinson met separately with Pun Ngai of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and Peking University, along with Sze Wan Debby Chan of SACOM.

Overview of labor and labor sociology in China

China has steadily expanded private ownership and foreign investment since the late 1970s, so that an increasing portion of labor relations are capitalist. The Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province to the south of China, which includes Guangzhou, Dongguan, Shenzhen, and reaches the ocean at Hong Kong, became the center of foreign investment and rapid manufacturing growth from the 1990s forward. The vast expansion of export-oriented manufacturing was staffed in large part by 150-200 million migrants from rural areas; under the *hukou* hometown registration system, they and their descendants are for the most part not entitled to social benefits (including access to public schools) in the cities where they live. Recently there has been a shift toward labor shortage as the effects of China's one-child policy have kicked in and other urban opportunities have arisen. Chinese manufacturers have responded by automating, shifting plants to the interior of the country to regions that traditionally sent migrants to the coast, and increasing wages. They have also sought out new workforces, including "interns" from the expanding pool of private vocational schools, who often receive minimal pay for routine work with little actual technical learning going on and little connection to their declared field of study. Since the passage of the 2003 policy by the central government to promote the growth of vocational schools, over 20 million student interns have been recruited to work in multinational factories such as Honda, FoxConn and Flextronics among others, often with direct involvement of city and provincial governments.

The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), with close links to the state and the Communist Party, is the only legally sanctioned union organization. The ACFTU's mandate is to harmonize relationships between employers and workers, a model developed under conditions of state ownership. The majority of ACFTU union leaders are not from the shopfloor, rather they come from white collar backgrounds. The ACFTU stuck to state-owned businesses and excluded rural migrant workers until the 2000s, but as private ownership expanded, it reached out to these workers. Its practices vary by region and sector, but in general it tends to have close ties with management, is often led at the plant level by middle managers, and in many cases focuses on organizing social activities rather than collective bargaining. By law union leaders should be elected, but application of this law varies widely.

Worker protests and wildcat strikes have become numerous in the last decade, including some highly publicized incidents like the 2010 strike wave in the auto sector in Guangdong (the province of which Guangzhou is the capital, and the heartland of Chinese manufacturing). There is no legally sanctioned right to strike, but nor is it barred by law. Some ACFTU leaders such as Chen Weiguang have been more responsive to worker aspirations and actions, whereas others have been more concerned about maintaining stability. Since the 2010 strike wave there seems to be new political space for union reform,

with continuing worker demands for democratic elections of local union leaders and a shift in government emphasis to dispute resolution rather than police intervention during labor conflicts. Under the Hu Jintao/Wen Jiabao leadership who ended their terms in late 2012, just before we traveled to China, party and state placed greater emphasis on expanding labor rights and building a middle class of workers, notably via the Labor Contract Law of 2008, which requires all employers to give every employee a written individual contract specifying terms of employment. Actual enforcement of the law is variable, but workers have a basis for making a complaint if the law is violated. There are also minimum wages set at the provincial level.

Labor NGOs began to be established in the Pearl River Delta in the 1990s, often with their main base in Hong Kong, which though Chinese-controlled has a different system of laws and governance than the rest of the country. The labor NGOs focus much like US worker centers, providing social services, classes and discussion groups, legal assistance, advocacy (via government, ACFTU, corporate social responsibility, and sister NGOs representing consumers abroad); the space for explicit organizing activity is quite limited. Though the largest number work with manufacturing workers, they also work with workers in more casualized sectors, such as domestic work and construction. Beginning in the early-mid 2000s, the labor NGOs expanded through a large number of industrial areas, including northern cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, but remain strongest in the Pearl River Delta and Hong Kong. The Oxfam Foundation estimates that about 100 labor NGOs are active in China, but Zhao Wei, who has been conducting research on the topic, believes there are many more. Given the rapid increase in the use of student interns in China, labor NGOs seemed particularly interested to learn more about similar cases of worker mistreatment and exploitation of student interns in other countries, including the U.S.

Starting in 2008, the state began to exercise stricter control over labor NGOs, and became more restrictive in issuing NGO charters. In 2012, about ten labor NGOs in Shenzhen were evicted by their landlords, invalidating their charters (which require a fixed address) and forcing them to close. Though the evictions were by private landlords, it is widely believed the authorities were behind the actions. According to the labor NGO spokespeople we met with in Hong Kong, NGOs receiving US or European Union funding were especially targeted.

Following the victory of the Chinese Revolution in 1949, the government abolished sociology as a discipline. With the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1975 and the beginning for reforms, sociology was reestablished, led by Fei Xiaochung, who had been a scholar of labor and other topics in the 1940s. Fei went on to found the Institute of Sociology in 1979. Thus sociology is in essence a relatively young discipline in China, people who were students of Fei and a small number of colleagues are the leaders of the field today. There are now about 80 sociology departments in China, more faculty who have been educated abroad in the US and elsewhere, and greater openness to Western sociology. The Chinese Academy of Work and Labor, established 2009, is interdisciplinary (including scholars in economics, law, and industrial relations as well as sociology) and probably bears a greater resemblance to the US field of industrial relations/labor relations than US labor sociology. (There is also an overlapping Labor Section within the Chinese Sociological Association, with whom we did not meet.) CAWL is oriented to thinking about practice and public policy, but historically has mainly related to the state, party, and union officials, with less experience in dialogue or collaboration with rank-and-file workers. Tong Xin and Zhao Wei have been conducting research on the labor NGOs, and they along with He Gaochao were probably the academics whose interests overlapped most extensively with those of us visiting from the US.

Chinese academic and practitioner interests and next steps

Everybody we met with seemed genuinely excited and interested in continuing to communicate and seeking out ways to collaborate. Academics at Sun Yat-Sen University in the South and the Hong Kong labor NGO staff clearly have much more contact with outsiders, including visitors from the United States, whereas for the participants in the Beijing meeting this kind of in-depth interaction is unusual. Language represents a significant barrier since few US sociologists speak Mandarin. Among the Beijing academics, the English of the senior leaders is poor to negligible; some junior people, along with current grad students and recent grads, speak English much better. Correspondingly, these academics' familiarity with English-language literature and the concerns of US labor sociologists varies widely, with the Beijing-based senior figures pretty disconnected whereas the Southerners and graduate students tend to be much more familiar with these things. However, the Beijing group is the one that has the leaders of the Chinese Academy of Work and Labor, LLM's potential institutional partner. And goals of the exchange include both establishing institutional ties and giving these academics in institutionally powerful positions access to ideas and practices of labor-academic collaboration that are likely to prove useful in China's increasingly capitalist labor environment. Li Pei Lin, Director of the Institute of Sociology and Vice Chair of the Standing Committee of the Chinese Sociological Association, was scheduled to attend the meeting, was unable to do so, but sent via colleagues a message indicating his interest in pursuing the exchange.

There are three possibilities on which we could follow up:

- A generalized but somewhat unfocused enthusiasm for collaboration with US scholars. This could take a wide variety of forms (continuing exchanges, classes and workshops, joint research projects, but the point is that there is a lot of openness and interest on the Chinese side.
- Connecting with specific academics (or practitioners) on specific topics or projects. The prospect that seemed particularly promising to us was the area of labor migration, informal and casualized work, and alternative organizing models, an area where Tong Xin and Zhao Wei are particularly active. (Zhao Wei's English is quite good; Tong Xin speaks some English but with difficulty.) The August 12, 2013 miniconference on "Labor and Global Solidarity" in association with ASA will be a good opportunity to meet Tong Xin, Zhao Wei, and others of the Chinese academics. We hope to set up some side meetings; let one of us know if you are interested.
- Chris T. and others proposed a set of specific, feasible action ideas at the Beijing meeting, which met with general approval:
 - Newsletter exchange. CAWL has a newsletter 4x a year, LLM has a newsletter 2x a year. Proposal: 2x a year in each newsletter, there will be a short column (250-500 words) from someone in the other organization. It could be a report on activities, a researcher describing their research, a commentary on current events, etc. The idea would be for different people to take turns writing something for the other organization's newsletter.
 - Web pages. CAWL and LLM both have websites, CAWL in Chinese and LLM in English. Proposal: Dedicate a page of each website to the other organization. There would be 3 kinds of content:
 - Basic and contact information: basic description of the organization, website address and at least one current contact person for the organization.
 - Aggregation of newsletter columns and reports from activities like our meeting (things we are writing anyway)
 - Space for people from the organization to post a short research profile, in the language of the website. This is optional, but is a way for researchers to be "found" by sociologists from the other country.

- Activity brokering. There would be brokering of two kinds.
 - Brokering of targeted contacts. For example, if someone in CAWL is looking for a US sociologist to give a plenary speech on a particular topic at a conference, or someone in LLM is looking for a Chinese sociologist to write an article on a particular topic in a special issue of a journal. Not putting out a general announcement to the other organization, but asking for help finding the right person.
 - Brokering of broader outreach. For example, if someone in LLM wants to distribute a call for papers for a conference, or someone in CAWL wants to announce a postdoctoral fellowship that is open to new doctorates from the United States.
- Organization of a miniconference in an upcoming Chinese Sociological Association meeting, featuring US labor scholars. (2013 meeting is July 2013, so looking at 2014 or later.)
- Participation of Chinese labor scholars in RC44, the Labor Movement Section of the International Sociological Association, at the ISA Congress in Yokohama, July 13-19, 2014.
- Translation of Ruth Milkman's "LA Story" (Zhao Wei seemed interested in undertaking this.)
- Chris T. also proposed a structure for mediating these activities. Again, this met with general approval, but there was not time to start setting up the structure. The idea is to set up two liaison groups, one in CAWL and one in LLM. These liaison groups should include:
 - Some people with good knowledge of the organization and contacts within it. They should be willing to help with outreach, and do some writing of columns. I expect these will mainly be professors.
 - Some bilingual people who are willing and able to do translation. We should only expect them to translate short pieces: columns of 250-500 words, announcements, short research profiles. We should not expect them to translate papers or anything of the kind. We are looking for people who would do this on a volunteer basis. Probably it would be doctoral students, who could get something to put on their CV like "Liaison Coordinator for Scholarly Exchange between CAWL and LLM".
 - If we can get 3-4 professors and 2 bilingual doctoral students for each committee, this would probably be enough to get the work done.